



Building a Front Porch

Creating a More Comprehensive Literacy
Community in Fargo-Moorhead

An Analytic Report from the First Literacy Summit

Facilitated by the Apple Core/Literacy Collaborative

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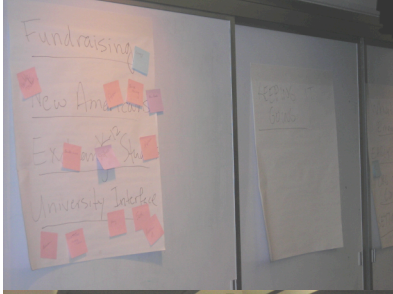


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Building a Front Porch

Introduction

During the evening of April 23, 2007, the Literacy Core student action team hosted Fargo-Moorhead's first Literacy Summit. In conjunction with First Link, the members of Literacy Core invited a range of Fargo-Moorhead organizations to discuss the state of our literacy community. Until this point, there had been no concerted effort to have a casual "front porch conversation" where different members of the literacy community could casually meet over coffee and cookies. In fact, there was no actual "front porch" to have these kinds of conversations. The first Fargo-Moorhead Literacy Summit provided the time and place to have that conversation. Over the course of that April evening, members of area nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies, and members of the educational community met and discussed commonalities, differences, stories, and concerns. This report will summarize the course of the evening as well as the conclusions that were drawn after the meeting concluded.

Literacies Defined

Functional Literacy. A working facility for adapting to the basic reading and writing demands of work and civic life. ...

Cultural Literacy. The ability to accumulate and employ the knowledge, habits, and codes that are characteristic of those who are "cultured."...

Academic Literacy. The capacity to negotiate the demands of schooling. ...

Critical Literacy. An aptitude for comprehending how individuals relate to the social, political, and economic systems in which they are situated.

—From Thomas Deans' *Writing and Community Action* (p. 69)

Summit Process

Literacy workers, volunteers, and organizations in the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area maintain a fairly low profile. Despite the perception that Fargo-Moorhead has very high literacy rates, there have been few studies to document actual citizen literacies in the community. The dearth of data, and lack of a cohesive community effort to document and address any community gaps in literacy services demands a conversation.

As a call to action, a summit meeting was held on April 23, 2007 at the Cass County Courthouse Annex building. At this event, numerous members from different for-profit and non-profit literacy organizations met to identify and plan to address primary literacy issues within Fargo-Moorhead. After an initial large group discussion to air out common themes and concerns, attendees were split into three focus groups in order to discuss more about specific issues concerning literacy services and needs.

The three focus group issues discussed were: literacy amongst new Americans, possible local university involvement, and childhood literacy

Attitudes of Participants Before the Summit

Prior to the summit meeting, Caitlin Fox sent out a survey with six questions regarding attitudes towards literacy to those invited to the meeting. Ten of these attendees responded to the surveys.

Several survey participants noted an interest in: public school and library programs, CHARISM, the Adult Learning Center, and FPL. Some gaps in services pointed out included: publicity targeting Sudanese refugees, dyslexic adults, and second language learners.

One suggestion for improvement was a suggestion to develop literacy based daycare and preschool programs. When asked how existing literacy services might better meet the needs of the community, the main concern was *increasing awareness of what's available, and the need for creating family based programs.*

Most participants chose to come to the Summit due to interest in the topic or out of curiosity. Others just wanted to help coordinate organizations and resources. Goals the responders initially wanted to see accomplished included: identifying local needs, making sustainable contacts for progress, and finding better ways of communicating services to the community. Topics suggested for discussion were communication between profit and non-profit organizations and groups looking for services, coordination of resources, and promotion of fundraisers and literacy projects already in place

Most responders agreed that the Fargo-Moorhead community does not provide its citizens with comprehensive literacy services. The answers varied when asked if participants knew of literacy services available within the area. Many knew of people or groups who could use more help with their literacy skills. In addition, most felt that not every group of people in Fargo-Moorhead had access to literacy services if they needed them.

Results and Discussion of Summit

Focus Group Discussions

Literacy amongst New Americans

Measuring Literacies

New American citizens are faced with a difficult array of issues upon arriving in their new country. Community members often attempt to group these individuals together and use English fluency as a gateway to literacy in our culture. This approach potentially deters new American citizens from accessing literacy services, because it delays new Americans who do not have advanced English language skills; in addition, those with

limited English language facility cannot access literacy services or are hurried through language instruction in order to access those services.

On solution suggested by the group was to more quickly gauge the various literacies of new citizens in order help them based on their needs. Instead of the one-sized-fits-all approach of English first, the multi-pronged measurement of literacies could help direct people who would benefit from more individualized and targeted services.

“There needs to be a coalition that integrates all forms of literacy for new Americans.” – Pam Strait, Fargo Public Library librarian

Integration of Different Literacies

Another, related problem to the one discussed above stems from integrating the different types of literacy. All of the new American citizens obviously are not going to speak the same language, and if we want to inform them about the available services, we need to be able to accommodate differing abilities and fluencies. Concurrently, the F-M community needs help New Americans develop their technology literacy.

“Literacy should not just be limited to the English language.” – Cindy Snelling, Fargo Barnes & Noble associate

There are several ways to go about solving this problem. One solution would be to take advantage of existing multimedia sources. Videos and other multimedia sources provide an excellent resource because so many of them already exist, and they could potentially be very helpful. Another way to solve this problem could be to integrate the students from local Universities, foreign-exchange students, and residents who know foreign languages into community literacy efforts.

University Involvement

Student involvement

Students are valuable assets when it comes to finding volunteers and advocates for specific organizations. This type of work has provided a valuable “service learning” opportunity for the students (where they take classroom learned knowledge and apply it to the community needs by assisting local organization). The work students contribute has definitely had an impact on the students as well as the organizations they have worked for. This potential has barely been tapped and remains one of the biggest possible assets the Literacy Community has yet to harness.

“The student workforce for literacy needs to be recognized because service learning is a great idea.” - Seth Archer, NDSU English Department Graduate Teaching Assistant

“Utilizing students as a workforce can be a great learning experience.” - Becca Mallem, NDSU Student

Besides sending students into the community aimed at writing for and assisting organizations, raising awareness of literacy issues can happen at the individual level. Students can tutor English skills, cultural awareness, and technological literacy.

NDSU involvement

NDSU itself functions as a great source of assistance to the community. The university offers learning workshops, basic technology instruction classes, and volunteer networks.

Neighboring learning facilities can also serve as learning locations. For instance, the neighboring Woodrow Wilson High School could serve as a designated location to offer writing and language education classes as well as a location to offer student volunteer opportunities.

“Woodrow Wilson may be a great potential outlet for writing education within the community.” - Seth Archer, NDSU English Department Graduate Teaching Assistant

MSUM and Concordia

Building the Fargo–Moorhead Literacy Community should not be limited to NDSU and its students, and should involve other local colleges such as Minnesota State University Moorhead and Concordia. Not only will this increase the support base, it will add a much larger range of unique language and literacy skills.

“Meeting regularly to talk about issues is a great idea for local colleges and all organizations interested in promoting literacy.” - Pam Strait, Fargo Public Library librarian

“It concerns me that various groups in the community are making efforts independently, unbeknownst to other parties with similar goals. They would be more effective working in concert, united in a well-organized effort to increase awareness for literacy development.” - Connie Molony, Fargo Public Schools literacy specialist

Childhood Literacy

New Americans and foreign exchange students

Within the foreign population of FM, there exists a difference between the reading levels of foreign exchange students compared to the reading levels of immigrant students. Often, immigrant students face a difficult time learning how to read within the schools. A possible solution to ending this problem would be to promote the tutoring of these students from exchange students of similar backgrounds.

“Exchange students in the area could help new immigrants to develop a better understanding of America.” – Karen Myran, CIEE exchange students

“Teaching English to new Americans in FM is a monumental task.” -Michele McRae, Giving and Learning Organization: Literacy for the New Americans

Local for-profit Organizational Efforts

Businesses like the Fargo Barnes & Noble often reach out to the community by encouraging children to read. For instance, booksellers offer reading programs for children that reward children with new books based on the amount of books that they have read. Parents play a role in these programs by monitoring the amounts their children have read.

“Barnes & Noble spreads books across the area and we try to create reading programs for children that reward children for reading as an incentive to read more.” - Cindy Snelling, Fargo Barnes & Noble associate

Recommendations

Build Coalitions with K-12 Schools and Libraries

- Many literacy services are hosted by or held at these traditional literacy sites.
- Take advantage of shared resources.
- Avoid duplication and create more awareness of services already available

Create More Ties with the Universities:

- Tie in more explicitly with entire Tri-College consortium.
- Connect already-extant services (like NDSU’s Service Learning office).
- Build ties to classes for a more stable opportunity for volunteers.
- Tie efforts to increasing population of foreign-exchange students and language academies.

Create More Comprehensive Literacy Inventories

- Locate and implement tests that acknowledge more complex definitions of literacy.
- Create bridges between different language and national communities.
- Create more lasting communication channels that take advantage of current community organizations (like First Link).